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Letters from heaven

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

I received the most disturbing letter I've ever received today from a reader. I've always imagined on day I'd get something like this, but still ... After I read it, like many of the letters I've received, all I could do was say a prayer.

Before I tell you what was in that letter, let me tell you what all this reader's mail has consisted of these past two years. It hasn't been just get well cards, but letters as personal and heavy as my columns.

I've always been a letter writer and I'm glad I've kept my personal letters over the years because many of those people who wrote are dead now, and saving their letters has been a way of keeping them alive. You

hear their voices today as clearly as the first day you opened their letters.

Many people ask me about the reader's mail, so I thought I'd talk about it today. I get about a dozen letters a week these days and I have received well over a thousand pieces of mail thus far. It is all respectful and full of good energy. Amazingly, I have received only three pieces of unsigned hate mail.

May I suggest correspondence as an inexpensive form of support to PWAs? Many are shut-ins and their mail boxes are the only link with the outside world. Wouldn't it be cheerful to be on some kind of AIDS pen pal mailing list? Sending a PWA a card is such an act of kindness, even if you're a stranger. Letters can be an effortless way to make contact with people, regardless of how you look or feel that day.

AIDS support groups, churches and newsletters could easily start their own informal mailing list of people desiring supportive correspondence. PWAs outside of the city are more isolated than you can imagine and are desperate to hear from anyone once in a while. That's what they tell me.

Recently I received a long letter from a man in his mid-seventies who confessed his whole closeted life to me; he was hidden, despite his marriage and kids. He talked about never having found himself as a gay man. He said I was the first person he'd ever told.

Another reader, also in his

seventies, wrote that his lover of 40 years had just died. He shared stories of their lives and expressed an overwhelming grief. He said that he was so isolated that I was the only one he could share this with. I am always extremely touched, but please remember, it's a heavy emotional thing to lay on me during this fragile time in my own life.

Because of the mail, I am struck by the deep isolation PWAs feel if they live outside the city. We forget how lucky we are in this town. To many, the gay newspaper is their only connection with the gay world — they never experienced gay life as existing in a physical neighborhood like the Castro.

Last year I received a note from a reader who had never been to the Castro. He was a straight, Vietnam veteran with full-blown AIDS and had no one to turn to.

After our long talk, I felt drained, but despite the occasional zaps of emotional energy, these situations always end up recharging me.

Last week I received a letter from a man who fled as his lover died of AIDS. He didn't do all he could have, in a classic survivor's guilt mode. "Maybe this sounds crazy, but I feel that I am perhaps asking for forgiveness from him through you," he wrote. I knew what he meant. I sent him a lovely note back, but what I wanted to say was, "Come on, get a grip: I'm dying of AIDS here myself. These are heavy issues suited for a counselor, not a columnist."

All this collected mail has been a definitive body of work that has rivaled my own personal account of the AIDS epidemic, as poignant and colorful as the AIDS quilt; an historical document from private citizens speaking from their hearts. I have bequeathed these several volumes of reader's mail to the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, where it will become a permanent voice, so that future generations will never forget. Thank you, all of you.

Real honesty touches people like nothing else. It is an organic, transformational emotion that has the power to

change lives. It has the potential to inspire others on their path of personal growth simple by standing as an example. I have no profound truths in these columns: I have just set examples of what is possible in the truth and honesty department because others have set examples for me over the course of my life. It's the teaching cycle and we all participate in it, whether we realize it or not. I continue to learn, and always will until the end, but some days the lessons are more intense than others.

On to the shocking letter I received today. What this man told me was profoundly disturbing. The uplifting part was that he felt such a trust with me, a virtual stranger, to open himself up. It jolted me in its honesty.

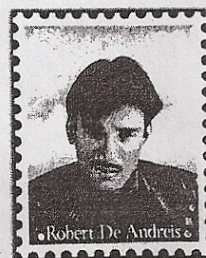
"I pray this letter finds you feeling better than last week. I'm sure that you don't want pity, but I must say that I am truly sorry that your health is declining the way it

is. I am a 27-year-old white bisexual man living with HIV. I am also permanently incarcerated for murder. I must admit that I did kill someone, but it was in self-defense (and I pray every day that the jury will believe that) because I am not usually a violent person. I have been following your articles in prison for the past six months and I feel a real bond with you.

Sometimes I get terribly afraid that I will just crumble. I can't imagine dying of this fucking disease in prison. I have no one in California and only my mother writes me, three times in the past six months ... " This man, whose name is Kevin, goes on to describe what it's like being sick in jail, and it's not a pretty picture.

I have shared this with you today because I never talk about his side of my work. Like those readers who confess to me, I am now confessing to about this other side of my work as a columnist. If you have any inclination to wish Kevin well, send the note to me and I'll forward it to him, but just for this next week only. My God, our first AIDS prison pen pal!

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